Get Inspired By These 35 Female Athletes Who Changed the World

For centuries, women in sports were overlooked and limited by outdated social norms and gender bias. But through resilience and revolution, these top 35 Female Athletes who changed the world have shattered records, challenged oppression, and redefined what's possible, proving their power far beyond the playing field.

Source: www.businessinsider.com

For centuries, women have been lacing up their boots, stepping onto the field, and redefining the boundaries of fitness possibility. Despite historical narratives that often overlooked their contributions, many female athletes have achieved remarkable accomplishments and led the way in sports from early on. These powerful women consistently demonstrated strength and dedication, forging a path that society is increasingly recognizing and celebrating. Their triumphs and

continuous commitment to inspire ensured their rightful place in the annals of sporting history.

However, a new chapter has opened. Thanks to their strong will and firm dedication of female leaders who challenged societal norms and shattered stereotypes, the world is finally waking up to the incredible impact of Female Athletes who changed the world.

These women aren't just breaking records; they are undoing barriers, championing equality, and inspiring generations across the globe, proving that their influence extends far beyond the playing field. It is truly the era of Female Athletes who changed the world.

Sports History of Female athletes who changed the world:

During the 19th century in America, women were often considered a risk to fertility and femininity when it came to sports and physical activity. It was considered acceptable for elite women to play gentle games like tennis or croquet while maintaining a fashionable appearance.

Working-class women were engaged in demanding physical labor, but their efforts went unseen and unacknowledged. Public displays of athleticism by women were discouraged as shameful or selfish acts. Feminine athletes, such as Helen Wills and Gertrude Ederle, changed how we defined femininity through the lens of sport. Women's wartime initiatives, such as the All-American Girls Baseball League, highlighted women's strength as athletes. Racial and gender barriers to athletic participation remained until Title IX was passed in 1972, which legally opened doors for women and changed how women viewed their roles as athletes and in society.

Here are the Top 35 Female Athletes Who Changed the World:

Throughout history, fearless female athletes have shattered records and challenged social rules, confronted injustice, and redefined what women can achieve in sports. From early pioneers to modern champions, these female athletes changed the world and the game. Here's a list of 35 powerful female athletes who left a lasting legacy.

1. Alice Milliat:

www.paris.fr

- Sports: Rowing, swimming, football
- Awards & Achievements: Founded FSFI (1921), organized Women's World/ Olympic Games (1922–1934); pivotal in adding women's athletics to the 1928 Olympics.

A French athlete and fierce advocate for women's inclusion in international sports, Alice Milliat founded the Women's World Games in 1922 when the Olympics refused to include female athletes. Her efforts laid the groundwork for

the eventual inclusion of women in the Olympic Games, making her one of the most influential figures in sports history.

"Women's sports of all kinds are handicapped in my country by the lack of playing space."

2. Lillian Copeland:

calisphere.org

- Sports: Discus, javelin, shot put
- Awards & Achievements: Olympic gold (discus, 1932); silver & bronze medals in javelin & shot put

An American track and field star, Copeland won Olympic gold in the discus at the 1932 Los Angeles Games. As a Jewish athlete, she stood as a symbol of resistance

and excellence during a time of growing global antisemitism. She also excelled in shot put and javelin, paving the way for women in throwing events.

“I can do better in every event than I did last.”

3. Fanny Blankers-Koen:

en.wikipedia.org

- Sports: Sprinting, hurdling
- Awards & Achievements: 4× Olympic gold (1948); AP Female Athlete of the Year 1948

Known as the “Flying Housewife,” Dutch sprinter Fanny Blankers-Koen defied gender expectations by winning four gold medals at the 1948 Olympics while being a mother of two. She shattered myths about female athletic limitations and became a national heroine in post-war Europe.

“All I’ve done is run fast. I don’t see why people should make much fuss about that.”

Read More: Who’s Trending in 2025? The 50 Most Popular Women on the Internet Right Now

4. Althea Gibson:

www.biography.com

- Sports: Tennis, golf
- Awards & Achievements: First Black Wimbledon & French Open winner; 11 Grand Slam titles; AP Female Athlete 1957–1958

Althea Gibson broke the color barrier in international tennis, becoming the first African-American to win a Grand Slam title at the French Open in 1956. She later won Wimbledon and the U.S. Open, blazing a trail for future champions like

Venus and Serena Williams in an era of deep racial segregation. This journey defined her to be one of the female athletes who changed the world.

“In the field of sports, you are more or less accepted for what you do rather than what you are.”

Read more at https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/althea-gibson-quotes

5. Wilma Rudolph:

teachrare.org

- Sports: Sprinting
- Awards & Achievements: First American woman to win 3 Olympic golds in one Games (1960); AP Female Athlete 1960–1961

A childhood polio survivor, Wilma Rudolph became a symbol of resilience and triumph after winning three Olympic gold medals in sprinting at the 1960 Rome

Olympics. As the first American woman to win three gold medals in a single Olympics, she challenged racial and gender stereotypes globally.

No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helps you.

6. Billie Jean King:

www.tennisfame.com

- Sports: Tennis
- Awards & Achievements: 39 Grand Slams; “Battle of the Sexes” winner; advocate for equal prize money; AP Female Athlete 1967, 1973

A tennis legend and gender equality advocate, Billie Jean King won 39 Grand Slam titles and famously defeated Bobby Riggs in the 1973 “Battle of the Sexes.” She also founded the Women’s Tennis Association and has long fought for equal pay and LGBTQ+ rights in sports.

A champion is afraid of losing. Everyone else is afraid of winning.

7. Kathrine Switzer:

www.boston.com

- Sports: Marathon running
- Awards & Achievements: First official female Boston Marathon entrant (1967); lifelong advocate for women's distance running

In 1967, Kathrine Switzer became the first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon, despite officials trying to physically remove her mid-race. Her determination and activism helped open long-distance running to women and led to the inclusion of the women's marathon in the Olympics.

"If you are losing faith in human nature, go out and watch a marathon."

8. Ann Meyers Drysdale:

www.bruinsnation.com

- Sports: Basketball, volleyball
- Awards & Achievements: First woman to sign with an NBA team (Indiana Pacers, 1979); 4× All-American, Olympic silver 1976

Ann Meyers broke gender barriers in basketball as the first woman to sign a contract with an NBA team (Indiana Pacers) in 1979. A standout in college and the Olympics, she helped elevate women's basketball and later became a respected broadcaster and executive in sports media.

"Somebody gives you an opportunity, say yes to it. So what if you fail? You won't know if you fail or succeed unless you try."

9. Martina Navratilova:

www.theguardian.com

- Sports: Tennis
- Awards & Achievements: 59 major titles (18 singles, 31 doubles); AP Female Athlete 1986, 1983

One of the greatest tennis players in history, Navratilova won 59 Grand Slam titles across singles and doubles. An outspoken LGBTQ+ advocate, she used her platform to challenge discrimination and advocate for gender equality, becoming a global icon both on and off the court.

“Whoever said, it’s not whether you win or lose that counts, probably lost.”

10. Florence Griffith-Joyner:

www.theguardian.com

- Sports: Sprinting
- Awards & Achievements: Still holds 100m (10.49s) & 200m (21.34s) world records (1988); AP Female Athlete 1988

Known as “Flo-Jo,” Florence Griffith-Joyner remains the fastest woman in history, holding world records in the 100m and 200m since 1988. With her iconic style—long nails, bold outfits, and blazing speed- she became a cultural icon and inspired generations of female athletes who changed the world.

If you want to run as fast as the men, you’ve got to train like the men.

11. Nadia Comăneci:

en.wikipedia.org

- Sports: Gymnastics
- Awards & Achievements: First perfect 10 in Olympic history (1976); AP Female Athlete 1976

Nadia Comăneci stunned the world at age 14 during the 1976 Montreal Olympics by scoring the first-ever perfect 10 in Olympic gymnastics history. The Romanian gymnast won five Olympic golds and revolutionized the sport with her grace and precision. Her performance elevated gymnastics' global profile and inspired generations of young athletes. Nadia remains a symbol of perfection and poise in women's sports.

"Maybe that's why I like gymnastics – because I like to fly."

12. Kristin Otto:

www.swimmingworldmagazine.com

- Sports: Swimming
- Awards & Achievements: 6× Olympic golds at one Games (1988), first woman to do so

Kristin Otto became the first woman to win six gold medals in a single Olympic Games (Seoul 1988). Representing East Germany, she dominated swimming with power and versatility. Despite later controversies surrounding East Germany's doping program, Otto's achievements brought global attention to women's swimming. She was a trailblazer in showing how women could excel in multiple events.

"I have no knowledge of ever having taken something to help my performance."

13. Cathy Freeman:

runnerstribe.com

- Sports: Sprinting
- Awards & Achievements: Olympic 400m champion (2000); lit the Olympic flame

Cathy Freeman lit the Olympic cauldron at the 2000 Sydney Games and then went on to win the 400m gold, becoming a symbol of unity and pride for Indigenous Australians. Her victory was more than athletic—it was political and cultural, breaking racial barriers in Australia. Freeman's graceful composure and historic win placed her among the greatest female athletes who changed the world.

"I think the greatest amount of pressure is the pressure I place on myself. So in a way I chose to be alone."

14. Ellen MacArthur:

bebevoyage.com

- Sports: Sailing (solo)
- Awards & Achievements: Set world record for fastest solo circumnavigation (2005)

Ellen MacArthur became the fastest person to sail solo around the world in 2005, defying both gender and maritime norms. Her endurance, intelligence, and courage in extreme conditions redefined what women could achieve in adventure sports. Post-retirement, she turned her focus to environmental advocacy, founding the Ellen MacArthur Foundation for a Circular Economy.

"If we could build an economy that would use things rather than use them up, we could build a future."

15. Sarah Storey:

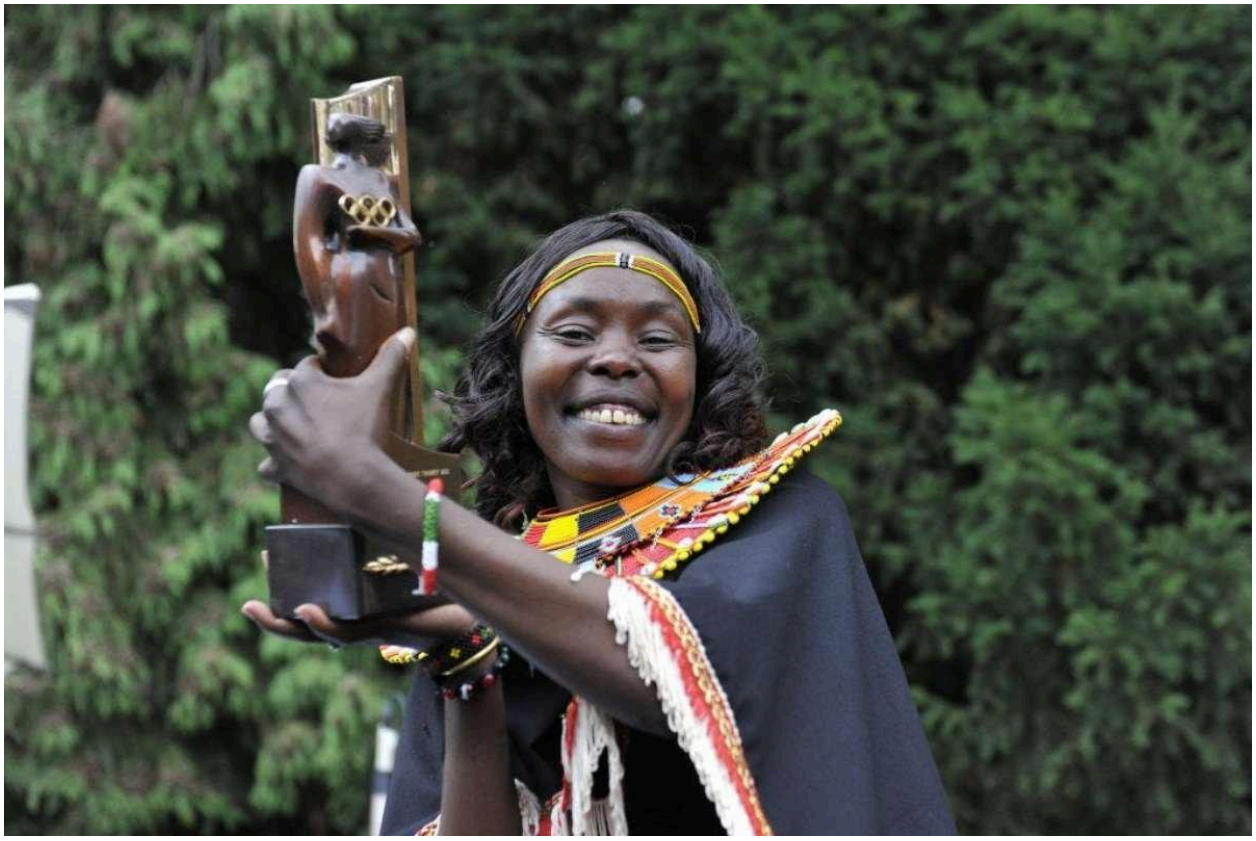
www.theguardian.com

- Sports: Swimming, cycling
- Awards & Achievements: Multi-Gold Paralympian across both sports (28 medals)

Born without a functioning left hand, Dame Sarah Storey is the UK's most decorated Paralympian, with medals in both swimming and cycling. She's won multiple golds across seven Paralympic Games, pushing the boundaries of adaptive sports. Storey is a fierce advocate for disability rights and inclusivity in athletics, making her a role model far beyond sports.

"The biggest motivation factor is really to be the best version of me."

16. Tegla Loroupe:



medium.com

- Sports: Marathon
- Awards & Achievements: Long-distance world record holder; peace & humanitarian efforts

Tegla Loroupe of Kenya was the first African woman to win a major marathon and a global champion for peace and refugees. Breaking stereotypes about African women, she dominated long-distance running in the 1990s. Today, she uses sport as a tool for diplomacy and empowerment through the Tegla Loroupe Peace Foundation, helping displaced youth and athletes.

"Running was in my blood from the beginning."

17. Venus Williams:

edition.cnn.com

- Sports: Tennis
- Awards & Achievements: 7 Grand Slams; led equal-prize-money movement at Wimbledon & US Open

Venus Williams transformed women's tennis with her powerful playing style and relentless advocacy for gender equality. A seven-time Grand Slam winner, she also spearheaded the movement for equal prize money at Wimbledon, changing tennis forever. Venus paved the way not only for her sister Serena but also for a more inclusive and fair sport.

"You just have to believe in yourself; you just have to. There's no way around it. No matter how things are stacked against you, you just have to every time."

18. Serena Williams:

www.skysports.com

- Sports: Tennis
- Awards & Achievements: 23 Grand Slams; AP Female Athlete multiple times

With 23 Grand Slam singles titles, Serena Williams is considered one of the greatest athletes of all time. Her dominance reshaped perceptions of race, strength, and femininity in sport. Beyond tennis, she's a vocal advocate for women's rights, maternal health, and racial justice. Serena's legacy transcends the court, blending athletic brilliance with cultural impact.

"In the sports arena, I would say there is nothing like training and preparation. You have to train your mind as much as your body."

19. Gretchen Bleiler:

bleacherreport.com

- Sports: Snowboarding (halfpipe)
- Awards & Achievements: Olympic silver (2006); multiple X Games medals; climate activism

Gretchen Bleiler is an Olympic snowboarder who helped popularize the sport in the early 2000s. Known for her stylish tricks and fearless halfpipe runs, she brought women's snowboarding into the mainstream. Off the slopes, she's a committed environmental advocate, working on climate awareness and sustainable living. Her dual influence in sport and activism set her apart.

"Life is short, and if we enjoy every moment of every day, then we will be happy no matter what happens or what changes along the way."

20. Santhi Soundarajan:

theprint.in

- Sports: Middle-distance running
- Awards & Achievements: 2006 Asian Games silver; human rights advocacy after gender-testing controversy

Santhi Soundarajan made history by winning silver in the 800m at the 2006 Asian Games, becoming one of India's top athletes. However, her career was derailed after failing a controversial gender verification test, sparking a global debate on sex, gender identity, and fairness in sports. Santhi has since become a vocal advocate for athletes' rights and inclusion, especially in India's rural communities. Santhi Soundarajan is truly one of the female athletes who changed the world.

"My legacy will remain not with my medals but with the determination and hope to overcome my past torment and my present struggles. I want to live my dream through my students."

21. Misty Copeland:

amsterdamnews.com

- Sports: Ballet
- Awards & Achievements: First African-American principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre; author & advocate

Misty Copeland made history in 2015 as the first African-American woman to become a principal dancer at the prestigious American Ballet Theatre. Rising from a challenging childhood, she shattered stereotypes in a field historically dominated by white dancers. Beyond the stage, Copeland is a bestselling author, an advocate for diversity in the arts, and a role model for young girls everywhere.

"Decide what you want. Declare it to the world. See yourself winning. And remember that if you are persistent as well as patient, you can get whatever you seek."

22. Nasim Eshqi:

www.ispo.com

- Sports: Mountain climbing
- Awards & Achievements: Early female climber; women's rights symbol in Iran

Nasim Eshqi is an Iranian rock climber who defied societal expectations and restrictions to pursue her passion in a male-dominated sport. Despite limited support for female athletes in Iran, she became a national icon, using her platform to advocate for women's rights and bodily freedom. Her story is one of courage, resistance, and redefining strength on her own terms.

"I'm an Alpinist who stands for freedom and human rights. Strength and speed alone are not enough for me; what matters is what I do with my strength. Our uniqueness as human beings lies in our ability to think, analyze, and uphold justice."

23. Anne Haug:

tri-mag.de

- Sports: Triathlon
- Awards & Achievements: Ironman World Champion (2019)

Germany's Anne Haug is a world-champion triathlete, celebrated for her resilience and tactical brilliance in grueling races that combine swimming, biking, and running. She made history by winning the 2019 Ironman World Championship, becoming the first German woman to do so. Haug exemplifies endurance, consistency, and the evolving role of women in extreme sports.

"I keep going because I still think there is more to come. I don't really care about my age. I feel 25."

24. Lindsey Vonn:

www.chrisbaileyorthopaedics.com

- Sports: Alpine skiing
- Awards & Achievements: 4× World Cup overall champion; Olympic gold & multiple medals

Lindsey Vonn is one of the most successful alpine skiers of all time, with 82 World Cup victories and an Olympic gold medal to her name. Known for her fierce determination and fearless style, she broke records and gender expectations on icy slopes. Off the slopes, Vonn is a businesswoman, philanthropist, and a strong advocate for mental health and body positivity.

"If you go around being afraid, you're never going to enjoy life. You have only one chance, so you've got to have fun."

25. Courtney Dauwalter:

www.lottie.com

- Sports: Ultra-marathon running
- Awards & Achievements: Winner of top endurance races (e.g., Western States, Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc)

Courtney Dauwalter is redefining limits in ultra-marathon running, often beating not just women but entire fields of men in 100+ mile races. Known for her signature basketball shorts and her refusal to quit, she brings humility and humor to a punishing sport. Her feats of endurance are unmatched, and she inspires athletes across all genders to explore their physical and mental boundaries.

"You're fine. This is fine. Everything is fine."

26. Megan Rapinoe:

www.britannica.com

- Sports: Soccer
- Awards & Achievements: World Cup champion (2015, 2019); Golden Boot & Ball (2019); Olympic gold (2012); Kopa Award

Megan Rapinoe is a World Cup champion and Olympic gold medalist, but her influence extends far beyond soccer. A fierce advocate for equal pay, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice, Rapinoe has used her platform to demand change on and off the field. Her activism has made her a global icon of progressive sports leadership.

"I need to feel like I have that freedom to make mistakes and to just try things."

27. Kristin Harila:

www.bremont.com

- Sports: Mountaineering
- Awards & Achievements: Record-breaker: fastest woman to climb all 14 eight-thousanders

Norwegian mountaineer Kristin Harila is rewriting history books by tackling the world's 14 highest peaks faster than anyone before. A former skier turned extreme climber, she challenges gender norms in high-altitude mountaineering. Her record-setting pursuits bring attention to climate change and inclusivity in the climbing world.That's why she is considered one of the female athletes who changed the world.

"There are a lot of sustainable technologies that I can't wait to experience!"

28. Sarah Hunter:

nhehs.gdst.net

- Sports: Rugby union
- Awards & Achievements: Over 140 caps; key leader & advocate for women's rugby

Sarah Hunter is a legendary English rugby player and former captain of the national team. Known for her leadership and toughness, she helped England win the Women's Rugby World Cup in 2014 and multiple Six Nations titles. Off the field, Hunter champions women's participation in contact sports and mentors the next generation of players.

"I think women's sport can really inspire the next generation of future England sporting greats. We have to get behind that and ensure that it happens."

29. Ana Ivanovic:

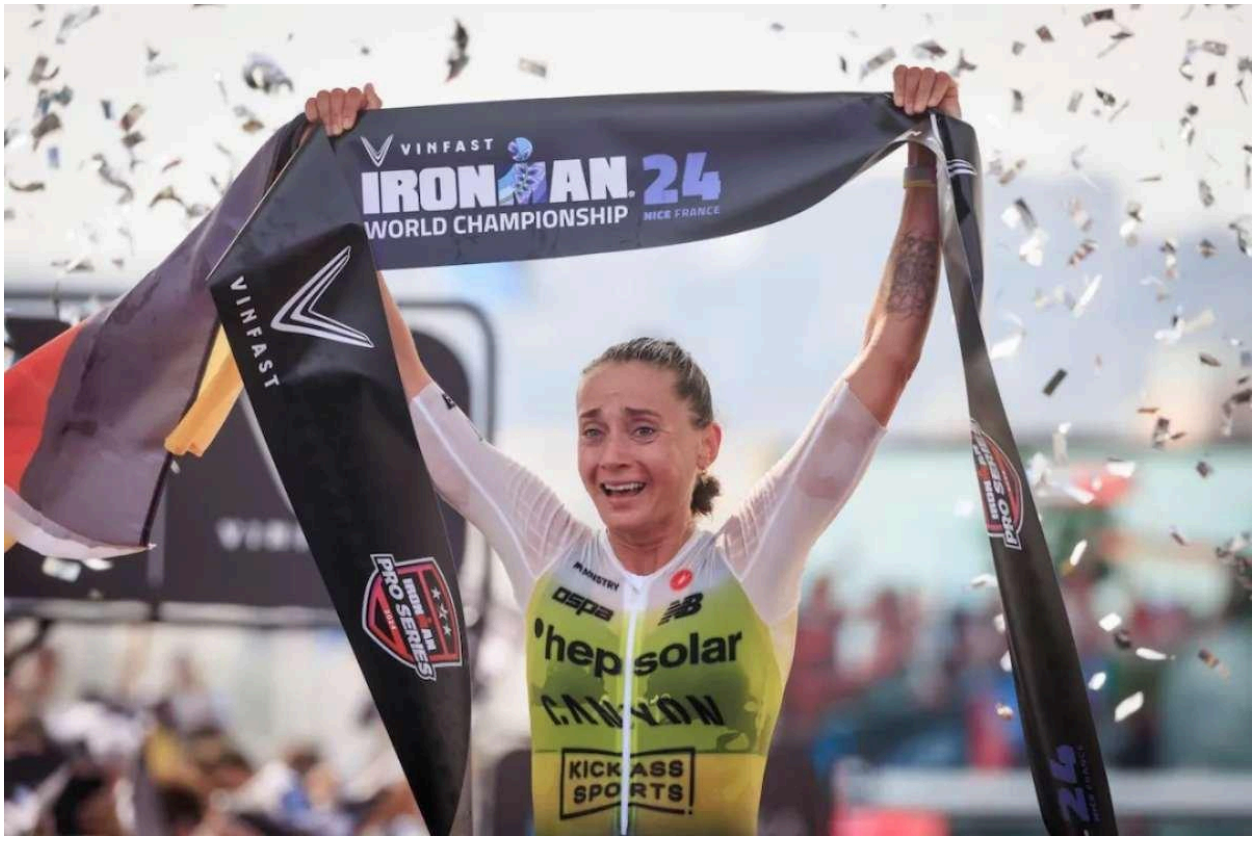
www.ubitennis.net

- Sports: Tennis
- Awards & Achievements: French Open champion (2008); former world #1

Ana Ivanovic, a former world No. 1 tennis player from Serbia, won the 2008 French Open and was known for her graceful power and mental strength. Her career inspired a wave of Eastern European talent in global tennis. Post-retirement, Ivanovic has focused on philanthropy and children's health, balancing fame with purpose.

"You're never out of the game until you've lost the final point."

30. Laura Philipp:



www.220triathlon.com

- Sports: Triathlon
- Awards & Achievements: Multiple Ironman 70.3 & Ironman podium finisher

German triathlete Laura Philipp is one of the most consistent and admired athletes in long-distance racing. With multiple Ironman wins and course records, she represents elite endurance, tactical racing, and sportsmanship. Off the track, she promotes plant-based nutrition and mental resilience, inspiring a healthier approach to high-performance sports.

"I'm going to see how I can handle it. I'm really ready for pain. I want to do it and feel it and feel okay at the finish line."

31. Manuela Mandl:

powderguide.com

- Sports: Freeride snowboarding
- Awards & Achievements: Freeride World Tour winner; promotes sustainability & women's access in extreme sports

Manuela Mandl is a champion freeride snowboarder from Austria, known for mastering some of the world's most dangerous mountain descents. A former Freeride World Tour winner, she's not only admired for her technical skills but also for promoting sustainability and gender equality in extreme sports. Her fearless style has helped open the male-dominated world of freeriding to more women.

"When I'm really on the mountain in great conditions… I'm completely in the moment, and it's a complete fulfillment… I just love playing with these boundaries."

32. Elnaz Rekabi:

www.8a.nu

- Sports: Sport climbing
- Awards & Achievements: Defied hijab rules at 2022 competition; symbol of freedom and gender equality

Elnaz Rekabi is an Iranian sports climber who gained global attention in 2022 when she competed without a hijab during an international event, defying Iran's strict dress codes. Her act became a silent symbol of resistance against gender oppression. Rekabi's bravery inspired women across Iran and the world, highlighting how sports can intersect with human rights and personal freedom.

"I was suddenly and unexpectedly called on to compete while I was at the women's locker room. I was busy wearing my shoes and fixing my equipment and forgot to wear my hijab, which I should have worn."

33. Sally Fitzgibbons:

www.heraldsun.com.au

- Sports: Surfing
- Awards & Achievements: Multiple World Surf League event winner; top-5 world-ranked surfer

Sally Fitzgibbons is a professional surfer from Australia and one of the sport's most recognizable female athletes. Known for her high-energy performances and infectious positivity, she has consistently ranked among the top surfers in the world. Sally uses her platform to inspire young girls to pursue sports, promoting healthy living and resilience.

"You can always work harder, and we are capable of extraordinary things."

34. Maria Toorpakai:

www.cbc.ca

- Sports: Squash
- Awards & Achievements: Rose above threats to compete internationally; advocate for girls' rights & education

Maria Toorpakai is a Pakistani squash player who defied Taliban threats by disguising herself as a boy to play sports in a region hostile to female athletes. Her courage and determination helped her rise to international acclaim in squash. She now advocates for girls' education and freedom in conservative societies, showing how sport can be a force for social change.

"I want a land for my human division. No flags, no identity, just a welcome for everyone. But you're left to welcome yourself, and a great table for everyone. And maybe, just maybe, we'll steal a few of those great nations."

35. Nouria Newman:

paddlingmag.com

- Sports: Whitewater kayaking
- Awards & Achievements: First woman to run several extreme rivers; multiple expedition records

Nouria Newman is a world-class kayaker from France, celebrated for navigating some of the most dangerous whitewater rivers on the planet. A pioneer in extreme kayaking, she's broken both records and gender norms in a sport where few women dared to compete at her level. Her adventures blend athleticism with exploration, redefining female strength and endurance in the wild.

"I have no shame in portaging, turning around, or giving up. Some days you have it in you, some days you don't."

Conclusion:

These admirable Female Athletes who changed the World have broken records and have also scattered decades-old social obstacles for future generations. They have opposed gender norms and advocated for equal pay, along with advocating for social change and human rights; their legacy bleeds far beyond sports. They are forever reminders that perseverance can change anything, reminding us all that when you have belief and passion, Female Athletes who changed the World can do what seems impossible, and they will leave an unforgettable mark on history.

FAQ:

1. Who is one significant female athlete in sports history?

Billie Jean King. As well as winning 39 major titles in her professional career and dominating her sport for over a decade, King also appeared in the legendary 1973 Battle of the Sexes matches.

2. Who was the powerful woman who changed the world?

Marie Curie was the scientific genius behind radioactivity and X-rays as we know them today. Not only did she become the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1903, but she also became the first person to ever win it twice in 1911.

3. Who is the greatest female athlete of the 20th century?

Having been named by Sports Illustrated as the ‘Greatest Female Athlete of the 20th Century’, Jackie Joyner-Kersee’s athletic credentials are unquestionably among the best ever, in all of sport.